

School Evacuations: Working to Stay Prepared



SCHOOL EVACUATIONS: WORKING TO STAY PREPARED

SUMMARY

Concerned about recent budget and spending cuts, the Grand Jury investigated whether reduced school funding could affect the ability of San Luis Obispo County schools to safely evacuate students in the event of an emergency. The jury found that school district safety officers are making plans to cope with reduced funding.

METHOD

Emergency evacuation plans were gathered from all school districts under the authority of the office of the county Superintendent of Schools. Based on these plans, various staff from several school districts as well as from the superintendent's office were interviewed.

NARRATIVE

The county's school-district-level safety officers meet regularly – at least eight times a year – with the County Superintendent of Schools safety coordinator to go over new issues and assess the status of the individual districts' safety plans. During the Grand Jury investigation it was discovered that no school district stands alone when an emergency arises that requires a bus evacuation. Not only will buses be sent from other schools in that district but other districts will also respond when notified through the office of the County Superintendent of Schools or the

county's Emergency Operations Center. Additionally, the Grand Jury learned that the County Superintendent's Office also has the authority to request the use of the public bus system. It was also brought to our attention that sometimes a walking evacuation can be effective given circumstances such as wind direction in a chemical spill or a problem with traffic-clogged roads.

At least one district in the county keeps its evacuation sites secret due to lessons learned from the Columbine incident.¹ While the shootings involved in that incident were widely publicized, it was later learned that propane bombs were placed at a number of locations which, according to at least one school official, included the school's evacuation site, the location of which was a matter of public record. Fortunately, none of the bombs located on school property detonated.

The Grand Jury found one potential problem involving the inability of bus drivers from one school district to communicate directly with bus drivers from another district. The individual districts must rely on information channeled through the office of the County Superintendent of Schools or the County's Emergency Operations Center. In order to give directions to bus drivers from a district, the county coordinator of emergency services must now communicate to that district's drivers through that district's dispatch center and have the operator there communicate with the district's own buses.

Given the presence of a nuclear power plant in the county and a major rail line running the length of the county, a serious emergency affecting a large area and several school districts is conceivable. Although the county's Emergency Operations Center is a valuable resource for control of any major emergency response, bus-to-bus communication across district lines to coordinate routing along with direct communication with each bus driver from the county's central command post could save critical response time. The Grand Jury was told that the bus-to-bus communication problem could be solved by the addition of a radio placed in each bus and tuned to a frequency reserved for bus-to-bus communications. Countywide, radios would cost about \$150 per bus. Officials indicated they might also need a new central "repeater" which

¹ April 20, 1999 – Columbine High School, Columbine, Colorado.

would be about \$6,500 and that there could be a problem securing an additional frequency from the Federal Communications Commission. But as yet, there has been no effort to address this issue either at the funding level or with the FCC.

CONCLUSIONS

San Luis Obispo County school districts are working to have effective and efficient emergency evacuation plans despite current monetary restrictions.

FINDINGS

1. The Grand Jury found that in the event of an emergency evacuation, it could be a great advantage for the bus drivers from one district to be able to communicate directly with bus drivers from another district.
2. The County Emergency Operations Center cannot communicate directly with individual school bus drivers during an evacuation.

RECOMMENDATION

1. The County Superintendent of Schools should provide the funds necessary to reserve a radio frequency and to obtain the equipment necessary to allow bus drivers to communicate directly with one another and with the County Emergency Operations Center in the event of an evacuation emergency

REQUIRED RESPONSES

The San Luis Obispo County Superintendent of Schools is required to respond to Findings 1 and 2 as well as Recommendation 1. The responses shall be submitted to the Presiding Judge of the San Luis Obispo Superior Court by **August 5, 2010**. Please provide a copy of all responses to the Grand Jury as well.

The mailing addresses for delivery are:

Presiding Judge	Grand Jury
Presiding Judge Charles S. Crandall Superior Court of California 1050 Monterey Street San Luis Obispo, CA 93408	San Luis Obispo County Grand Jury P.O. Box 4910 San Luis Obispo, CA 93402